


GAMES

STRAT-O-MATIC VS. APBA: A TOUGH CALL

Up there among the great debates in sports history is the passionate struggle between loyalists to two baseball board games. Choosing between Strat-O-Matic and APBA, indeed, is like choosing your favorite Beatle; it tells



you something about yourself.

Remember those games? Most of us probably played either the APBA Pro League Baseball Game or Strat-O-Matic Baseball. Most of the baseball board-game players today still play APBA or Strat-O-Matic. Amid a field of a dozen or so games, APBA and Strat-O-Matic still control close to 90 percent of the market and both companies report growing business.

Jim Sundberg of the Cubs plays APBA. Atlanta Braves Rick Mahler and Dale Murphy play Strat-O-Matic.



APBA, which came first, offers more accurate statistics, but Strat-O-Matic (above) puts you in the manager's chair.

David Eisenhower used to play APBA in the White House during the Watergate days. And George Bush has played APBA for over 20 years. The strike-shortened 1981 season was a boom year for Strat-O-Matic: A Strat-O-Matic all-star game that was played in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium received as much media attention as a real All-Star Game. (The National League won, 15-2.) A Boston radio station played out the entire Red Sox schedule during the strike with a Strat-O-Matic set. And that year, the Strat-O-Matic game was honored with a special display in the Hall of Fame.

To the uninitiated, APBA and Strat-O-Matic look fairly similar. Both use player cards based on a season's statistics. Both use charts, game boards

and dice. Both allow you to play any number of past seasons, as well as set up dream matches between great teams of the past (such as the 1906 Cubs vs. the 1927 Yankees). And both have large and fanatical followings.

But the similarities end there. APBA fans and Strat-O-Matic fans are about as polarized as Mets and Yankees fans are in New York. "I don't see how it could be otherwise," says APBA president Richard Seitz. "They're so different." APBA fans are proud of their game's statistical accuracy and the detail of its playing boards. Strat-O-Matic players point to the individuality and uniqueness of their game's player cards. APBA notes that its game came first. (Seitz marketed his original game in 1951; Strat-O-Matic appeared 10 years later.) Strat-O-Matic is proud that its game leads in sales (by a substantial margin, according to Hal Richmond, Strat-O-Matic's creator). APBA says its game is more realistic. Strat-O-Matic says its game is more realistic. And so on and so on.

The crucial difference between the two games is in the player cards. APBA's cards are filled with play result numbers calculated through Seitz's secret formulas. To start, a dice roll is matched on a player's card with a number that in turn refers to a situation chart for a description of the result. The cards are designed to reflect individual player characteristics—in effect, these cards mathematically reduce a player's entire season's performance to a series of numbers. APBA fans even believe that these cards begin to take on the personalities of their respective ballplayers; singular traits like Bert Blyleven's gofer balls or Gary Carter's knees all show up in the cards.

In the long run, say over a season's worth of play, these cards produce results remarkably consistent with the real player's statistics. Says Seitz: "My main effort is to get accurate statistics so that when you play the game you get real life results." To that end, APBA limits the game player's ability to make certain managerial choices, such as calling for a stolen base. Such decisions are instead controlled within

the game. "These managerial decisions are exactly what you don't want to give to the player," says Seitz, "because you destroy the statistics."

Strat-O-Matic's cards have actual player averages and a complete play chart printed on them so that a play result is immediately revealed after a dice roll. "APBA's play boards give excellent detail, but it slows things down," says Richmond. "Strat-O-Matic is much more individually detailed."

Strat-O-Matic also allows a person greater latitude in managing a team. "Our game is much more realistic," says Richmond. "We give people the opportunity to make a decision on fielding, running and other factors, whereas in APBA, it's really built in." Richmond argues that although such choices may affect a player's averages, in real life managerial decisions *do* affect player performances.

And the debate goes on. Strat-O-Matic says it has better lefty/righty factors for hitting and pitching, as well as such other variables as ballpark effects and clutch-hitting statistics. APBA claims those are gimmicks. APBA defines baseball realism as the interplay of accurate statistics. Strat-O-Matic says realism is the opportunity to make real managerial decisions.

So which is better? Howard Ahlsgog, who runs a monthly game magazine called the *APBA Journal*, thinks the two games are meant for different audiences. Strat-O-Matic, with its card individuality, managerial choices and overall speed, has strong play value. But APBA, with its statistical accuracy, fewer decisions and detailed charts, has powerful *replay* value.

"The average APBA fan," explains Ahlsgog, "wants to see a game unfold. So now you've got these guys that are 40 years old replaying the 1957 season, because he remembers that's what it was like, back in the golden age of his youth. Or they want to go back and replay the 1927 season or the 1908 season, to see what baseball was like back then. And the dream matchups, the fantasy stuff... the whole hot stove area of 'what if.' That's a very big attraction with many APBA fans."

So what do Strat-O-Matic fans do if they prefer recreating history? And what about the large contingent of APBA fans who do like the managing aspects of the game? How do you choose?

Go upstairs to your attic, find that old shoe box full of cards and start playing.

—Albert Kim